

# In Our Own Voices

FOUR CENTURIES OF  
AMERICAN WOMEN'S  
RELIGIOUS WRITING

*Rosemary Skinner Keller and  
Rosemary Radford Ruether, editors*

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**T**HE first Jews arrived on the North American continent in 1654 when twenty-three Dutch Jews landed at the port of New Amsterdam. By the end of the seventeenth century, they had gained the right of public worship and established the Portuguese-speaking Congregation Shearith Israel (the remnant of Israel). As late as 1820 there were only about three thousand Jews in the United States, about half of them Sephardic (Spanish, Portuguese, or Mediterranean) and half Ashkenazic (western and eastern European). Between 1820 and 1880, two or three hundred thousand Jews arrived as part of a mass migration from Germany. These German Jews and their children were the dominant force in the emergence of American Judaism during the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

The vast majority of American Jews trace their ancestry to the flood of immigration from Russia and eastern Europe that accompanied increasing anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish violence beginning in the 1880s. This group would total about three million before the United States closed its doors to immigrants in 1923. During and after World War II about a quarter million Jews gained entrance to the country, many of them survivors of concentration camps, all of them dislocated by Nazi atrocities. During the 1970s and '80s over 150,000 Jews emigrated to the United States from the Soviet Union, with additional immigrants coming from Israel, Iran, and other countries in the Middle East. Since the destruction of European Jewry by the Nazis, American Jews have comprised the largest Jewish community in the world. As of 1992 approximately six million Jews live in North America, comprising 2.4 percent of the population of the United States and 1.2 percent of the Canadian population.<sup>2</sup>

### WOMEN IN JEWISH TRADITION

Judaism is based on a covenant between God and the Jewish people, in which the people agree to do the will of God as given to them in his law, the Torah. Halachah, the body of Jewish law derived from the Torah and the Talmud, governs not only synagogue ritual but every aspect of life, from the preparation and serving of food to economic activities and sexual relations. For Jews who live in accordance with the law, every action performed in fulfillment of the law is sanctified as a religious obligation (mitzvah). This means that centuries-old beliefs and practices about the

different roles and natures appropriate for men and women are not simply a matter of tradition but are codified in religious law.

The law specifies very different roles for men and women, both in religious practice and in areas considered to be matters of civil law in contemporary America (marriage and divorce, for example). Of the 613 commandments incumbent on adult males, women were exempted from those that had to be performed at a specific time, because time-bound obligations were considered to conflict with their roles as bearers and nurturers of children and homemakers. While Orthodox Jews hold that this reflects a sanctification of the different roles of men and women (document 9), others question whether women are actually included in the covenant if they are not bound by all its commandments (document 6). Many debates in contemporary Judaism hinge on whether "exemption" of women from important mitzvot means that they are incapable of performing those religious duties and must be excluded from them or whether it means that although women are not required to observe those mitzvot they may voluntarily assume those obligations and fulfill them equally with male Jewish adults (documents 4, 7).

In normative rabbinic Judaism, the exemption of women from certain religious obligations was interpreted as disqualifying them for those mitzvot. Thus women could not be counted in the minyan of ten adults required for public prayer. Because a minyan was required, they could not say kaddish, the memorial prayer for the dead, for their own parents. They could not serve as witnesses. Because daily public prayer was not a commandment for women, and women's voices and appearance might arouse men and distract them from their prayers, women were secluded behind a barrier (*mechitza*) in the synagogue, far from the bimah, where men read from the holy Torah. In addition, married women were required to wear wigs to hide the attractiveness of their own hair.

In early American history, similar restrictions on women were shared by many religious groups. Separate seating for men and women was common, as were requirements for modesty in dress and the belief that it was improper for women to speak in public. When the Protestant evangelist Charles Grandison Finney encouraged women to pray aloud in "promiscuous assemblies" comprised of both men and women in the 1830s, he was roundly condemned. But as the nineteenth century wore

on, American Protestants drifted away from the practice of separate seating and from squeamishness about women's voices in public worship.

But for Jews, separate seating, like virtually every limitation on women's role, was not simply a practice that could drift out of style; it was a law incumbent upon the Jewish people as a whole in fulfillment of their covenant with God. Every question about lifting restrictions on women's religious practice involved a basic challenge to long-accepted interpretations of Jewish faith. Change required confrontation with the basic understanding of Jewish law as a comprehensive system that could be elaborated but never reduced. Even traditions that could not be traced directly to the Torah were considered to be religious obligations if they helped build "a hedge around the Torah" to encourage observance of other commandments. Attempts to expand women's religious role aroused fears about the loss of the religious distinctiveness that generation upon generation of Jews had struggled so hard to preserve.

While normative or rabbinic Judaism excluded women from many religious practices, Jewish women over the centuries developed their own traditions for the sanctification of everyday life. As in most cultures where there is a high degree of sex segregation, rituals performed exclusively by women in some ways constituted an unofficial parallel religion from which men were excluded. The rabbis recognized four "women's mitzvot": lighting Sabbath candles in the home; setting aside a sacred portion while baking challah (egg bread) for the Sabbath; following the laws governing the separation of husbands and wives during and after menstruation (*niddah*); and purifying oneself in the *mikvah* (ritual bath) following menstrual separation. Women had their own prayer books, printed in the vernacular. These contained *techinot* (supplicatory or devotional prayers) for the specific events of a woman's life, including prayers for the safe delivery of a child; prayers for the safe return of a husband from a journey; prayers for a woman married to an irreligious husband, and so forth.<sup>3</sup> In addition, many of men's ritual obligations, such as following dietary restrictions and observing the Sabbath, could not be fulfilled without the active cooperation of wives and mothers.

Since Jews came to America, questions about women's role in Judaism have sparked constant debate and inspired broad religious innovation. The great internal debate of American Judaism in the nineteenth

century was what amount of American practice could be adopted before religious practice ceased to be Jewish. Americanization and the participation of women in public worship reform were converging trends that encouraged a new religious role for women.

#### JEWISH WOMEN IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Although considering themselves orthodox, early American Jews showed great flexibility about adapting to American standards for women's participation in public worship. The letters of Rebecca Gratz (document 1) are among the most vivid and intimate accounts of American Jewish life before the beginning of the German immigration. She and her gentle sisters-in-law read the Bible and other religious books together and discussed them in their letters. The ease and frankness of their religious discussions shows a remarkable lack of friction between their faiths. Gratz's description of the 1826 dedication of the new synagogue of Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel Congregation suggests that Jews accepted certain American practices without question until later arrivals from Europe reasserted more traditional practices. The mixed choir that sang at the dedication ceremony attracted attention only for the sweetness of its song, while the propriety of mixed choirs was much debated over the next decades because of the traditional view that women's voices caused sexual arousal in men.

The German Jews who came to the United States in the nineteenth century brought with them a new movement that hoped to preserve the essence of Judaism while modernizing its rituals and practices to bring them in accord with the dictates of reason and of modern life—the Reform movement. Reform Jews wanted to participate fully in the opportunities offered by life in America, and they were anxious to shed traditional practices that stood as barriers between themselves and other Americans. To them menstrual taboos, dietary restrictions, and other traditions practiced by women seemed embarrassingly archaic. The Reform movement made women the religious equals of the male laity. Isaac Meyer Wise, the leader of the American Reform movement, advocated sweeping changes in women's religious status. Besides counting women as full congregational members, seating them in the main body of the synagogue, and extending equal access to religious education, Wise

deleted the word *obey* from the marriage ceremony, instituting reciprocal vows to replace the traditional marriage ceremony in which the woman was silent and passive. He also advocated women's suffrage and ordination, but neither of these was instituted during his lifetime.<sup>4</sup>

The Reform movement and the lack of facilities, such as mikvahs (ritual baths) and kosher food, discouraged the traditional religious activities of Jewish women: going to the mikvah, keeping *kashrut* (dietary laws), and keeping the Sabbath in the home. With some significant exceptions, the architects of Reform Judaism found that male religious practices were rational and essential and should be preserved, while women's practices were irrational and outmoded and should be abandoned. This peculiar bargain, of being offered equality in exchange for the abandonment of women's practices, often placed women in the position of the defenders of orthodoxy. Women controlled whether their families observed dietary restrictions as well as whether they and their husbands observed the laws of ritual purity. In the United States the "kitchen religion" of Jewish mothers sometimes outlasted religious observance by husbands and sons. The first synagogue in Chicago, Kehliath Anshe Mayriv, is said to have been founded because a pious woman, Dillah Cohn, refused to eat meat that was not kosher. Her sons, unwilling to see their mother subsist on vegetables, organized a congregation able to support a kosher butcher.<sup>5</sup>

Women who accepted the Reform movement rechanneled their religious lives into the formerly male realm of the synagogue. They were included in confirmation classes and Sunday schools, often making a majority of both students and teachers. The expanding role of women in the synagogue was not limited to the Reform movement. Women committed to tradition saw themselves as guardians of orthodoxy in the synagogue as well as the kitchen, just as their Christian contemporaries saw themselves as the guardians of Christian piety. In response to the radical reforms adopted by Congregation Beth Elohim in Charleston, a group of women started a coeducational religious school. The Jewish press noted that "this sacred and laudable undertaking emanates from the mothers and daughters of Israel who are opposed to the innovations lately established in this congregation, and whose zeal and energies will be actively employed in impressing upon the tender minds of their pupils the orthodox tenets of our religion."<sup>6</sup>

## EMIGRATION FROM RUSSIA AND EASTERN EUROPE

Starting in 1881, tens of thousands of Jews each year fled the poverty and persecution of Russia and Eastern Europe to make new lives in the "Goldene Medina" (golden land) of America, which was said to offer a life of freedom and riches. Among the three million Jews who arrived from eastern Europe was a larger proportion of women than in any other immigrant group arriving during this period. While some immigrant groups consisted mainly of men who hoped to save money and then return to their homelands, Jewish immigrants had no homeland to which to return. They staked all their hopes on the prospect of a new life in America. They came as families, and they came to stay.

The majority of Jews who arrived in the United States disembarked at Ellis Island and made their way to Manhattan's Lower East Side as soon as they had cleared customs. Crowded into an area of a few square blocks, hundreds of thousands of Jews from all over Europe lived, worked, and worshiped in the same tenement buildings. Suddenly freed both from hundreds of years of censorship and from traditional European sex roles, Jewish women approached the challenge of forging a new life in America with immeasurable vitality.

Jewish women poured energy and determination into the maintenance of family life in the ghetto. A typical tenement floor contained four apartments of two or three rooms, each housing a family with several children, with a front room reserved for boarders.<sup>7</sup> Unmarried women and girls went into the sweatshops, while married women labored under equally oppressive conditions. In the crowded kitchens of tenement apartments, married women cooked and did laundry for boarders and fed their families in shifts, whenever this one or that one returned from the shop. Whether women wanted to adopt American ways or maintain traditions, poverty stood in the way (document 2). Homemakers struggled to keep Jewish observance alive in the ghetto. Settlement worker Lillian Wald wrote of one woman she visited on a Friday afternoon who had put two kettles of water on the stove to boil so that her neighbors would not know that she was unable to fulfill her sacred obligation to prepare a special meal for her family on the Sabbath.<sup>8</sup>

Crossing the Atlantic was not simply a geographic transition. Jews packed their bags in the semifeudalism of czarist Russia and disem-

barked in the most modern city in the world, New York. The Judaism they brought with them was embedded in cultural forms of another time and place. The customs of early marriage and large families facilitated men's halachic duty to procreate but also reflected the different economic and social conditions in the Old World and the New. To some Jews, America meant freedom to practice their religion unharassed. To others, it meant freedom from Judaism—freedom from religious authority and from the pressure to conform to the standards of the Jewish community. For all, life in America presented a conflict between a deeply ingrained heritage and the appeal of Americanization (document 3). For women, subject to men within Judaism, American ways had a special appeal. Novelist Mary Antin, in her paean to America, *The Promised Land*, lamented her sister's early marriage, which she attributed to the fact that at the time the family emigrated her sister was too old to attend school and "imbibe American ideas." Antin felt it was "a pitiful accident that my sister should have come so near and missed by so little the fulfillment of my country's promise to women."<sup>9</sup>

The sheitel, the wig worn by married women to hide the attractiveness of their own hair, visibly distinguished recently arrived "green-horns," still immersed in traditional Jewish culture, from women who had adopted some measure of American values and dared to show their own hair. For mothers, the conflict between the new world and the old was experienced every day when their children returned from school, the primary vehicle of Americanization.

Jewish families were quick to take advantage of the public schools. In the old country, the chief function of education was to provide religious training for boys, so girls received little or no education. In the United States, the public schools brought boys and girls into the same classroom. So anxious were parents and teachers to have their children enjoy the benefits of life in America that Americanization was often encouraged at the expense of respect for Jewish traditions. Julia Richmond, the German Jewish district superintendent of the Lower East Side schools, forbade the use of Yiddish, the "mama loshen" (mother tongue) spoken in the Jewish home. Children caught speaking Yiddish to one another at recess had their mouths washed out with soap. In the attempt to Americanize immigrant children, the public schools taught them that their heritage was un-American and lower class.<sup>10</sup> Parents who spoke

Yiddish to their children were answered in English. It was often repeated: "In America, children become the teachers of their parents." Mothers who did not work outside the home had the least contact with American institutions and might become embarrassments to their acculturated children. Stories with titles like "Embarrassed by Mother" pervaded the Jewish press.<sup>11</sup> Children learned contempt for their families and their heritage in the public schools and from the examples of German Jews and other Americans. Educators used the "oriental conception of woman's status" held by Jews to condemn Jewish tradition.<sup>12</sup> America offered women opportunities for self-fulfillment clothed in anti-Semitism.

#### WOMEN AND RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE BEFORE THE 1970s

"Perhaps the single most disruptive force . . . to American Jewish Orthodoxy," wrote the sociologist Marshall Sklare, "has been the position of woman." He found that failure to adapt to the American norm in which women supply the bulk of time, energy, and money for the maintenance of religious institutions would have meant "organizational suicide" for American Judaism.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, once exposed to American freedom, many Jewish women could not accept the restrictions placed on them by Jewish traditions. Emily Solis-Cohen, Jr., was shocked by the attitudes she encountered during fieldwork for the Jewish Welfare Board in 1932.

It was disturbing to encounter, the country over, the notion that in respect to proscribed religious observances, to the conduct of public worship, to education, even to some phases of domestic life, Jewish law discriminates in favor of the sons of Israel, and that such favor springs from its fundamental attitude toward Israel's daughters. Personal experiences of many a girl are cited by her, as warrant for the assertion that apparently "woman does not count in Jewish life."<sup>14</sup>

Solis-Cohen, like Hadassah founder Henrietta Szold, accepted the view that exemptions from positive commandments "arise from a consideration rather than a disregard for women."<sup>15</sup> Szold extended the logic of this view to argue that the rabbis never intended to disqualify women from the mitzvot but only to excuse them. Having no maternal or household responsibilities with which religious duties would interfere, she did

not believe that she was exempt from the ritual obligation of saying kaddish when her mother died in 1916, a responsibility usually limited to sons (document 4). This line of reasoning has been adopted by Jewish women across the religious spectrum who have taken on obligations formerly limited to men (document 7).

Sklare attributed the great success of Conservative Judaism to the increased role allotted to women. The Conservative Movement, which tried to adapt Judaism to American life without departing from the process of historical development, followed exactly the Protestant model of "formal equality coupled with limited participation." Women were seated with men in services and joined them in liturgical responses. However, the principle of equality was not extended to the most important part of the ritual, the handling and reading of the Torah scrolls, much less to ordination of women as rabbis. Conservatism enjoyed enormous success among the postimmigrant generation, becoming the largest sector of American Judaism during the 1950s and '60s.<sup>16</sup>

The incorporation of women into the synagogue service had also been a significant factor in the success of the Reform movement in the nineteenth century, which represented almost all American congregations until the influx of Jews from eastern Europe, beginning in the 1880s, introduced more traditional forms of worship. Across the religious spectrum there has been a persistent (though still incomplete) trend toward greater inclusion of women in religious practice. The bat mitzva, in which girls, paralleling the bar mitzva ceremony for boys, are called to the bimah and own the covenant, began in the Reconstructionist movement and was slowly adopted by other groups. The first bat mitzva ceremony took place in 1922, celebrated by Judith Kaplan (later Eisenstein), daughter of Mordecai Kaplan, founder of Reconstructionism.<sup>17</sup> Until the late sixties bat mitzvahs in Conservative congregations were generally held on Friday nights, when the Torah is not read.

No less than Reform and Conservative Jews, Orthodox Jews were faced with American sex roles, in which women had freedom and opportunities unheard of in the old country. During the twenties, one Orthodox rabbi observed that the debate over seating women behind a curtain in the synagogue was so heated that "congregations are formed or dissolved" over it.<sup>18</sup> Another found that "the modern Jewess, more than the modern Jew, is responsible for the disintegration of our faith," because

women were not spending enough time at home creating a "Jewish atmosphere."<sup>19</sup> Although the Orthodox have emphasized the benefits of traditional sex roles over the need for change, some Orthodox leaders responded to the American scene with a resolve to offer women increased opportunities within traditional Judaism. Yeshiva University, itself an adaptation to the desire of Orthodox youth for secular education, opened a high school for girls in 1948. In 1954 Yeshiva opened Stern College for Women, where students could pursue a collegiate program combined with an extensive Jewish curriculum under Orthodox auspices.<sup>20</sup>

#### FEMINISM AND RELIGIOUS INNOVATION

The emergence of the second wave of American feminism in the 1970s owed a substantial debt to the traditions of social activism and social criticism in the Jewish community. American Jewish women have always been activists, pouring enormous energy and commitment into building communal institutions like schools and hospitals, as well as supporting and leading a variety of political and social movements like labor, consumer advocacy, and socialism. The National Council of Jewish Women, founded by Hannah Solomon in 1893, addressed the needs of women among Russian immigrants during the early twentieth century and continues to focus on issues like domestic violence (document 3).<sup>21</sup> Feminism continued the commitment to equality for women expressed by the women of the Zionist movement, who outnumbered men during the early twentieth century. The early women Zionists were visionary idealists who worked to gain equal rights both for homeless Jews and for men and women. They envisioned a binational state of Arabs and Jews, which would be a model to the world of justice and cooperation (document 5). Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, was founded in 1911 by Henrietta Szold to provide health care for the residents of Palestine. It was America's first national Zionist organization and has remained the largest. "The Zionist organization," according to Szold, "since it believes in the equality of men and women, must educate Jewish women not only to Judaism but to a realization of their civic and national responsibilities."<sup>22</sup>

Betty Freidan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* and founder of the National Organization of Women, attributed her concern for women's

rights to her "passion against injustice, which originated from my feelings of the injustice of anti-semitism."<sup>22</sup> Other Jewish founders of feminism include Gloria Steinem and Letty Cottin Pogrebin, cofounders of *Ms.* magazine; former Congresswoman Bella Abzug; and authors Grace Paley, Phyllis Chesler, and Andrea Dworkin—all of whom joined together for women's Passover seders during the formative years of the women's movement.<sup>23</sup> As Pogrebin recalled in her essay "Anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement," Jewish values might inspire feminist activism, but the movement they helped create was not always willing to accept their religious identities.<sup>24</sup>

But while the impact of Judaism on feminism may be somewhat covert, no observer could miss the impact of feminism on Judaism during the last twenty years. The desire of women to participate fully in their religion has been one of the most creative forces in recent developments in liturgy, theology, and piety (documents 8, 10, 11).

The Reform movement finally lived up to its promise of equality for women with the ordination of Sally Priesand in 1972. The Reconstructionists followed suit in 1974 with the ordination of Sandy Eisenberg Sasso.<sup>25</sup> Women quickly came to comprise half of the entering class at the Hebrew Union College (Reform) and a majority of students at the Reconstructionist Seminary. But because neither of these groups recognize observance of Jewish law as the basis for religious practice, these events did not send the shock waves that would emanate from the demands of women in more conservative sectors of Judaism. The same year that Sally Priesand was ordained, a group of young, well-educated Conservative women calling themselves *Ezrat Nashim* (the name used for the women's section of an Orthodox synagogue) began lobbying for lay rights for Conservative women. They went before the Rabbinical Assembly, whose Committee on Jewish Law and Standards establishes the legal precepts of Conservative Judaism. In an extremely controversial decision, the Assembly extended to women the right to be counted in a minyan and to be called to the Torah but stopped short of declaring women to be fully obligated Jews with responsibilities for religious observance equal to those of Jewish men.<sup>26</sup>

The following year Rachel Adler davened (prayed) with tallith (prayer shawl) and tefillin (phylacteries) at the first National Jewish Women's Conference. This startling action became a model for other women, who

started experimenting with sacred practices that had never been performed by women before (document 7). In the mid-seventies a group of college students at Brown University started a women's minyan and published a women's prayer book that adhered to traditional religious forms but used specifically female language and imagery to refer to God.<sup>27</sup>

In 1983 the Faculty Assembly of the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) voted to admit women as rabbinical students. The swiftness of change following this decision indicates the readiness of many segments of the Jewish community to accept women's leadership and the ambivalence of American Jews toward religious law. Eighteen female students comprised half of the entering class of JTS the following year. The first woman rabbi ordained by the Conservative movement was Amy Ellberg in May 1985. In 1987 JTS began awarding women the diploma of *hazzan* (cantor), previously awarded only to men.<sup>28</sup>

While some Jewish women felt alienated from the tradition because they felt excluded, others felt motivated to challenge that exclusion because of their desire to observe Judaism more fully. In the late 1970s, Orthodox women began organizing their own prayer groups in order to be able to fulfill mitzvot that Jewish law prohibits women from performing in the presence of men or that allows them to perform only if a man is unavailable. Such groups meet on Shabbat mornings to conduct a full service, with the exception of prayers requiring a minyan of ten men. Because men are not present, they cannot be distracted by women's voices, and women are halachically permitted to lead prayers and to read from the Torah scroll. In a way, these women's prayer groups represent a more radical departure from Jewish gender expectations than the egalitarian models pursued first within the Reform movement and now, more cautiously, in Conservative Judaism as well. Rather than incorporating women into the male-dominated sphere of the synagogue, these groups create a space within Jewish ritual that is completely controlled by women.

Orthodox male religious authorities have universally condemned women's prayer groups. In 1984 a group of rabbis from Yeshiva University issued a responsum declaring such groups prohibited by Jewish law on the grounds that they falsify the Torah, that they are against Jewish tradition, and that they result from the influence of non-Jews in the feminist movement. Ironically, the rabbis accused women whose goal was to

increase their observance of Jewish law with being influenced by non-Jewish practices. As Rivka Haut, a leader of the movement for Orthodox women's prayer groups, observed, "The rabbis who signed the responsum are apparently not aware that many Jewish women were among the founders of the feminist movement." In response to rabbinic condemnation, she and Judy Bernstein founded the Women's Tefillah Network in 1985 to provide resources and support for Orthodox women who want to form their own prayer groups.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time that increased inclusion is demanded by women in all segments of Judaism, the traditional path of the Jewish wife and mother whose spirituality focuses on maintenance of the home and family exerts a renewed appeal to women who feel alienated by the materialism, sexual exploitation, and instability of secular culture. The *ba'arat teshuva*, the woman who rejects modern expectations for fulfillment in favor of a strictly observant lifestyle, has become a familiar figure in discussions of contemporary Judaism. The family-centered culture of Orthodoxy and Hasidism has attracted secular Jews, converts, and even an occasional feminist.<sup>30</sup> Like Judaism itself, these women defy the predictions of social scientists who saw secularization as a one-way street and assimilation into a predominantly Christian culture as inevitable for American Jews. By choosing to struggle with their tradition's challenges in a variety of ways, American Jewish women are bringing the same vitality to their religious lives that made their grandmothers legendary as bulwarks of the immigrant communities.